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Despite Low Profile, U.S. Retains Laos Clout

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VIENTIANE — The United States retains the capability of giving the Lao government considerable military support if hostilities are renewed in Laos despite American redeployment of its paramilitary organizations and dependent troops into a low-profile military posture in the eight months since the Laos cease-fire, well informed sources say.

The basic change in the American military stance here, the sources say, is that most of the support elements for Lao forces, particularly ground command and advisory elements and air logistic support have been moved across the border into Thailand, particularly to Udorn Air Base, 34 miles from the Lao border. It's only an extra ten or fifteen minutes flying time across the border to Laos operations," An American said. That logistical and advisory support can still be given rapidly and efficiently with new deployment was proven in September.

STRONG PRO-COMMUNIST Pathet Lao forces crossed a river into a government-held zone near the town of Dong Hene in the South Laos panhandle but were quickly pushed out in a series of firefights by troops airlifted in Chinook American helicopters based in Thailand. Americans were able to keep the troops supplied as usual during the fighting which was spread over two weeks.

The operation was kept secret by the U.S. Embassy here with an American spokesman dubbing the operation a series of small scattered clashes.

In fact, some U.S. officials here have gone to considerable pains to label the American redeployment here as an American withdrawal, with the United States pulling out its assets well before the time required.

The United States is not actually required to withdraw from Laos until 60 days after formation of a Laos coalition government, an event that seems several weeks off, at least.

North Vietnamese forces are also not required to withdraw until the 60-day period.

HERE'S WHAT'S happened in the past eight months' redeployment to American led and organized forces and the Americans concerned in support operations:

Lao irregulars, who were paid by the Americans, sometimes advised and sometimes led by Americans and whose operations were planned by Americans, and who ended up doing most of the offensive fighting necessary to defend Laos, have now been officially integrated unit by unit into the Royal Lao Army.

The units themselves remain intact. The men have not been split up among royal troops.

Apart from training stints these units remain responsible for the areas in which they fought before the cease-fire. To make these units officially part of the Royal Army certain steps were taken.

They are paid through the Royal Lao Army accounting system although the money still comes from the good old American taxpayer.

The days when a U.S. official descended from a helicopter and paid each man from a cardboard box full of Lao money are gone.

The irregular officers have been receiving royal commissions to the ranks they attained in combat.

Before the cease-fire officers in irregular ranks were promoted by Americans according to battlefield performance and military ability. There were quite a few

MOST IRREGULAR officers, however, held lower

grade commissions in the Royal Army before volunteering for the irregulars. Irregular officers have now gone through additional training and examination with the Royal Army in the past eight months as a prelude to attaining their own rank (irregular ranks by Royal Commission).

In the last three years of the Laos war, when fighting was extremely heavy it was not unusual for 1,200-man regiment to be run by an officer holding only a captain's royal commission but promoted by Americans to colonel for battlefield ability.

However, other royal officers who took little part in the fighting were jealous of the fast promotion of men they considered their subordinates by Americans.

The irregular units have received Royal Lao Army unit designations. Most of the men wear the insignia of first and second strike divisions on their shoulders.

WITH FEW OPERATIONS to plan, no paying and promoting of men and little fighting, most of the Americans who were responsible for those units have left Laos. These Americans were mostly ex-military on temporary hire to the CIA for paramilitary purposes. Some remain in Thailand ready if needed and keeping a fatherly eye on training schedules and intelligence gathering teams here.

Thai irregulars and their American operations officers remain in Laos in position at the front and will do so until a new Laos coalition government is formed. After a coalition, both Thais and Americans will move to base camps just few miles across the border in Thailand and will be available for any post-coalition fighting if Lao government forces get into bad shape.

THE THAI ROLE has always been to defend and hold terrain after it has

been captured by Lao irregulars.

"The Thais departure will leave huge gaps in the line. I don't know how the Lao will fill them," one source said.

The United States Air Force continues to carry out reconnaissance in Laos with unmanned drones and crewed jet aircraft more. However, the "Ravens," light aircraft manned by Americans based in Laos and used for aerial reconnaissance have been withdrawn from Laos. "Porter" aircraft belonging to continental Airlines are called on sometimes for reconnaissance in course of their duties and it been reliably reported one of their aircraft is involved in electronic surveillance.

The USAF has not officially dropped bombs in Laos since mid-April during the communist cease-fire violation at Ta Vieng, sources say.

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